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Inexperience a Concern

Clark Brings Discipline to Reagan Staff

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WASHINGTON—Last December, when West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt unexpectedly telephoned President Reagan at the White House to discuss a key foreign policy point, the flustered President sounded as if he didn't know what Schmidt was talking about.

He didn't. That was because an earlier letter from Schmidt, raising the issue and saying the German leader would follow up with a trans-atlantic call, somehow was misplaced in the briefcase of White House counselor Edwin Meese III. So had a sheet of U.S. briefing papers laying out the issue for the President.

The President sent a letter of apology to Schmidt, personally taking the blame for the confusion.

But embarrassingly sloppy staff work no longer plagues the President in the foreign policy area—thanks to William P. Clark, his new national security adviser. Since he took over in January, Clark's decisive nature and closeness to Reagan have enabled him to impose order and discipline where confusion and interagency bickering once prevailed.

More Deeply Involved

And, since Clark arrived, Reagan has become far more deeply involved in foreign affairs, defense and intelligence issues. In recent months, Administration officials say, he has devoted one-third of his time to national security matters—three times as much attention as he gave them last year. He sets out this week on his first European trip and will hold summit meetings on foreign

Serious questions have begun to arise, however, as Clark has moved to reassert traditional White House control over national security affairs or at least dispel the widespread view that the President plays no significant role in the area.

Despite a year's service as deputy secretary of state, the affable, slow-talking former California judge is the least experienced man to hold the national security adviser's post since it was created shortly after World War II.

'President's Intellectual'

Clark's inexperience has caused concern on two counts: Although he is self-assured and increasingly powerful, Clark lacks the detailed familiarity with complex issues that seems necessary to avoid missteps and to become the kind of creative, innovative influence that most of his predecessors have been.

The questions about Clark's lack of experience loom all the larger because the national security adviser has come to be viewed as "the President's intellectual" on foreign affairs, a field in which Reagan is also a relative newcomer.

An example of the problems that inexperience combined with self-assurance can cause occurred soon after Clark took his White House post. Within a month, he approved and promulgated several policy memos prepared by the National Security Council staff on intelligence matters—memos that had been bottled up under Clark's predecessor, Richard V. Allen.

The memos came as an unhappy surprise to the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency. In consternation, CIA leaders opposed at least one of them, and eventually that directive was substantially revised.

As the President moves more and more under Clark's tutelage, some national security specialists fear that the potential for more serious missteps may increase.

Already, Reagan has asserted himself on foreign policy maneuvers without first consulting the State Department, the Pentagon or members of his top White House staff except Clark, one senior Administration official said.

'Have a Meeting'

last April to announce that he would address the United Nations Disarmament Conference in June, Reagan also expressed hope that Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev would do the same and suggested that the two leaders could then "have a meeting."

Reagan refused to call it a "summit," but that appeared to be what was implied.

Neither Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. nor Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger had been asked in advance for their views on this approach to summitry. Nor did any of the so-called White House troika—Meese, Chief of Staff James A. Baker III or Deputy Chief of Staff Michael K. Deaver—get more than 10 minutes' warning on what the President was going to say, a senior official said.

Unsettling Events

Such events are unsettling to national security specialists, although most Presidents have taken things into their own hands from time to time—and the results have not always been bad.

As former Secretary of State Dean Rusk has noted, Presidents often ignore the formal structures. "The real organization of government at higher echelons is not what you find in textbooks or organization charts," Rusk has written. "It is how confidence flows from the President."

In any case, the problems that have arisen under Clark are considered a small price to pay for the improvements in national security affairs that he is credited with achieving.

After almost six months on the job, Clark's performance is evaluated this way by specialists in and out of government:

—High marks for ending the confusion at the White House under Allen and Meese, through whom Allen reported to the President. Clark has direct access to Reagan, which vastly increases his influence and authority.

—High marks for ending the bickering between the State and Defense departments. Haig and Weinberger now clear foreign travel

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